The Minister's Black Veil

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Nathaniel Hawthorne grew up in Massachusetts. As a child, he injured his leg, and was forced to spend a year in bed; he later recalled that he first developed a love for reading at this time. He attended Bowdoin College, where he was a poor student. As a young man, Hawthorne worked as an editor and wrote short stories, many of which, including "The Minister's Black Veil," were published in his collection *Twice-Told Tales*. Hawthorne was a reclusive man, but in 1842 he married a woman named Sophia, who greatly admired his work. In the mid 1840s they moved back Salem, where Hawthorne briefly worked as a surveyor, but found it difficult to concentrate on writing. In a remarkable streak that lasted from 1850 to 1860, he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, one of the first true best-selling novels in the United States, *The House of the Seven Gables*, often regarded as his greatest book, *The Blithedale Romance*, his only work written in the first person, and *The Marble Faun*, a highly influential collection of poetry. Hawthorne died of a stomach ailment in 1864, only a few months before the end of the Civil War. His reputation in America was so great that the most important writers of the era, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., Louisa May Alcott, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were pallbearers at his funeral.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Minister's Black Veil" takes place in Puritan New England, but a specific date and place are never given. The Puritans, a Protestant sect, migrated to America in the 1610s and 20s, establishing small, strictly run communities throughout New England. The Puritans wanted to strip away the ceremony and strict hierarchies of existing Christian sects, making all Christians equally close to God. At the same time, they also put a strict emphasis on proper, godly behavior – music, dance, and celebration were discouraged or even banned – and how a person acted could deeply impact whether that person was perceived as being good or worthy of heaven. In spite of its lasting reputation for theocracy and tyranny, Puritan society was very democratic relative to the time, and gave power to elected representatives, as Hawthorne briefly mentions.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Another notable American work that criticizes Puritan society is Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible*. "The Minister's Black Veil" is also an important precursor to Hawthorne's later work *The Scarlet Letter*, which also deals with sin and ostracism in a small Puritan town. For a sample of Puritan American sermons (the kind Hooper gives after he wears the veil), Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands on an Angry God" is probably the most famous such text.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Minister's Black Veil
- **When Written:** 1836
- **Where Written:** Beacon Hill, Boston
- **When Published:** 1836
- **Literary Period:** American Romanticism
- **Genre:** Short story; parable
- **Setting:** Milford, a Puritan town in Massachusetts
- **Climax:** Reverend Hooper revealing why he wore the veil on his deathbed
- **Antagonist:** The townspeople of Milford
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Family connections. Hawthorne was born Nathaniel Hathorne, a descendant of John Hathorne, the Puritan judge who ordered the execution of the "witches" at the Salem Witch Trials (he shows up in *The Crucible*). Hawthorne was so ashamed of his ancestry that he changed his name, adding the "w".

Powerful friends. Hawthorne was a close friend of Franklin Pierce, the 14th president of the United States, and even wrote a short biography of him. In Boston, Hawthorne was neighbors with Ralph Waldo Emerson, the influential essayist and poet — unfortunately for history, Hawthorne was so shy that the two literary giants almost never spoke to one another!

PLOT SUMMARY

In the small Puritan town of Milford, the townspeople walk to church. As they're settling into their seats, the sexton points out Milford's young minister, Reverend Hooper, walking thoughtfully toward the church. Hooper is wearing a black veil that covers his entire face except for his mouth and chin. This sight disturbs and perplexes the townspeople, and some think that Hooper has gone insane, but when he delivers his sermon for the day, they are unusually moved. Afterwards, Hooper goes through his usual practice of greeting his congregation, but no one seems to feel comfortable interacting with him.

In the afternoon, there is a funeral service, and Hooper's veil is

appropriate for the occasion. As he bends over the body, which belonged to a young woman, his veil hangs down, so that the woman could see his face if she were alive — Hooper quickly covers his face again. As Hooper leaves the church, two townspeople comment that it seems as if he is walking with the woman's ghost by his side. In the night, Hooper performs a wedding for a young couple. He catches a glimpse of himself in a mirror, and is so terrified by his own appearance that he spills the ceremonial wine on the carpet and rushes out of the church.

Everyone talks about Hooper's veil, but no one asks him why he is wearing it. Some believe that Hooper is insane, but most say that he has committed a horrible crime, and is atoning for it by hiding his face. Eventually, a group goes to see him, but they are too intimidated to inquire about his veil. The only person in Milford who isn't afraid of Hooper is Elizabeth, his fiancée. Elizabeth asks Hooper to show her his face and explain why he has chosen to cover it; she warns him that the townspeople think he has committed a grave sin. Hooper refuses, and says that all humans have sins. He begs Elizabeth to spend her life with him, adding that he is terrified of being alone, and that when they are reunited in the afterlife, his veil will come off. Elizabeth begins to grow afraid of the veil, and breaks off their engagement. From then on, Hooper is completely isolated from the rest of Milford.

Hooper's veil makes him an extremely impressive preacher. Before he wore it, his sermons were mild and pleasant; afterwards, the townspeople think that his speeches are darker, more powerful (though the narrator of the story suggests the sermons aren't much different at all). People claim that the sight of Hooper's black veil converted them to Christianity, and sinners on their deathbeds ask to see Mr. Hooper. Hooper's reputation for being an impressive preacher stretches across New England.

Years pass, and Hooper grows old and sick. On his deathbed, he is nursed by Elizabeth, who has continued to love him despite never marrying him. A group of clergymen, including the young Reverend Clark, gather around Hooper and praise him for his moral reputation. They beg him to allow them to remove his veil, so that they may see the face of a good man. Hooper shouts that his veil must never be lifted on earth. Confused, Clark asks Hooper what crime has caused Hooper to hide his face. In response, Hooper asks why Milford has been afraid of him for so long, and says that they should be afraid of each other. He can only be condemned, he continues, when all humans are completely honest and open with each other. With his dying words, Hooper says that he looks around and sees a black veil on every face. Shocked and impressed, the clergymen bury Hooper with his face still covered.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Reverend Hooper – The protagonist of "The Minister's Black Veil," Hooper is a young, mild-mannered preacher in the town of Milford. However, one day, without giving an explicit reason, he begins wearing a black veil that covers his face from his forehead down to just above his mouth. While Hawthorne never reveals exactly why Hooper decides to wear the veil, Hooper suggests that he does so to teach the townspeople to consider their own sins, to consider the way that they hide or are separated from each other and from God. Despite his somber appearance, Hooper is a kind, loving man and hates the isolation he endures when the town assumes that he must wear the veil as atonement for having committed a serious sin. Whether or not Hooper is atoning for a specific crime, his character is difficult to understand: while he exhibits great humility by cutting himself off from his society in order to deliver his message, he could be considered a proud, arrogant character, too, since the wearing of the veil is such an overt or even ostentatious way to communicate his message (a message that isn't even understood by the town until he reveals it on his deathbed).

Elizabeth – Elizabeth is Hooper's fiancée at the beginning of the story. After he begins wearing his veil, she is the only person in Milford who isn't immediately afraid of him. When Hooper refuses to show his face and explain himself, she begins to fear him, and shortly thereafter she breaks off the engagement. Despite abandoning Hooper, Elizabeth continues to love him even as he grows old, and on his deathbed, she takes care of him and helps to ensure that his veil isn't removed.

The young woman – The young woman, who is being buried on the day that Hooper first wears his veil, has no lines in "The Minister's Black Veil," but it's been suggested by some readers that she is the story's most important character. Edgar Allan Poe argued that she and Hooper were lovers, and Hooper's decision to cover his face is caused by his guilt after her death.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Joseph Moody – Another clergyman who wears a veil. Hawthorne explains that Moody, a minister of a town in Maine, does so because he accidentally killed his friend as a young man. Hawthorne adds, cryptically, that Hooper's veil has a different meaning than Moody's.

Reverend Clark – Reverend Clark, a young priest from the nearby town of Westbury, is standing by Hooper's bedside when he dies. He asks Hooper what crime caused him to hide his face, and listens in shock and amazement to Hooper's response.

Squire Saunders – An old member of the Milford community

who usually invites Hooper to dine with him after services, but doesn't do so in the story because, it is strongly implied, once Hooper starts wearing the veil.

The physician – The physician thinks that Hooper is insane when he first puts on the veil, but also notes, perceptively, that men are sometimes afraid to be alone with themselves, foreshadowing Hooper's discussion of sin and guilt.

The sexton – The first person to notice that Hooper is wearing the veil, the sexton quickly draws the entire town's attention with his shocked response to Hooper's changed appearance.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PURITANISM AND PIETY

"The Minister's Black Veil" takes place in a small Puritan community, so understanding the tenets of Puritanism is crucial to understanding the story. The Puritans were a Christian Protestant sect that emerged in the early 1600s in England. They were quickly banished from the country for their "subversive" beliefs, leading Puritan "pilgrims" to travel to America and establish small colonies in the region that's still called New England. The Puritans believed that all human beings were born in a state of sin inherited from Adam and Eve, and that only good behavior and religious education could lead them to an eternal afterlife in Heaven. For this reason, the Puritans' day-to-day lives and religious ceremonies were as simplified as possible: they didn't dance, sing, wear bright colors, or go to plays. They focused, instead, on their piety, and saw their behavior as an outward manifestation of their inner goodness (and likelihood of going to heaven).

In "The Minister's Black Veil," Hawthorne dramatizes the conflict between Hooper's strict Puritanism and Milford's rather more lax Puritanism. At the beginning of the story, the townspeople are thinking "secular" thoughts as they walk to church: children are laughing, and the young men are admiring the young women. By contrast, Hooper, once he puts on the veil, seems like a paragon of Puritan virtues. He denies himself the pleasure of marriage or friendship, even though Hawthorne makes it clear that he values both of these things; when pressed for his reason, he insists that he is more concerned with his reward in heaven than with his life on earth: the quintessential Puritan tradeoff.

As the story progresses, Hawthorne shows the flaws and contradictions of Puritanism. While it's true that Hooper's veil encourages the townspeople to pay more attention to his sermons, and fear for the state of their souls — in a sense, to be better Puritans —Hawthorne never shows the reward for the townspeople's "gloom." It's as if strict Puritanism has taken the townspeople's joy and energy for nothing. Further, the Puritan townspeople, with their focus on sinfulness, quickly come to believe that the veil must represent *Hooper's* sins, rather than understanding that through the veil he is trying to tell them to look to their own sins. Even Hooper, seemingly the perfect Puritan, may be violating his own beliefs. The black veil hides his face, but ironically, it makes him more "visible" and noticeable to the townspeople — in this sense, he could be guilty of the sin of pride. It's not clear why Hooper is any more moral than the townspeople laughing and enjoying their Sunday walk to church — the only difference is that he's miserable. Ultimately, Hawthorne seems to suggest, Puritanism has its good points, insofar as it encourages humans to live moral, pious lives, but it may go too far in depriving them of joy and encouraging them to "show off" their morality.

APPEARANCE, PERCEPTION, AND INTERPRETATION

Puritan communities were extremely small and close-knit. Thus, townspeople acted as each other's enforcers — if someone misbehaved, everyone else would know about it. Hawthorne makes this dynamic clear in the first paragraph of "The Minister's Black Veil," when he describes the way the sexton alerts the entire town to Hooper's altered appearance. In Hooper's funeral sermon, he says that God is always watching, but the truth is that the ***townspeople*** are always watching and judging their peers.

But although the people of Milford are always watching, they're superficial in their judgments. Unlike God, they have no way of knowing the status of other people's souls; they can only see others' appearances and make interpretations of what's beneath. Though Hooper's appearance changes after he wears the veil, everything else about him is the same: he's still pensive, still in love with his fiancée, Elizabeth, still eager to greet his congregation, etc. On paper, he delivers exactly the same Sunday sermon as usual, but his appearance leads the townspeople to *perceive* the sermon as much darker and more severe than his usual offering. A simple piece of clothing alters their perception of a man they've known for years.

Hooper's appearance leads the town to imagine elaborate interpretations of why he chooses to wear the veil. Some think he's losing his eyesight, some think he's going insane, but most think that he has committed a grave sin and is afraid to show his face. Elizabeth, who's clever enough to understand how powerful appearances can be in Milford, urges Hooper to remove the veil, lest the townspeople interpret it as a sign of his sinful behavior. Even though the townspeople are too timid to ask Hooper about his veil, or accuse him of wrongdoing,

Elizabeth knows that their interpretations are dangerous by themselves. Indeed, the townspeople's interpretation of Hooper's appearance leads to his ostracism from Milford: because of the power of appearances and interpretations, he's isolated almost entirely by the town.

And yet, over the years, while the people of Milford have been interpreting Hooper, Hooper has been interpreting them. On his deathbed, he comments on the townspeople's obsession with appearances, saying that everyone in Milford wears a Black Veil. In a sense, this means that the townspeople have focused too much on interpreting *his* appearance of sinfulness and too little on their *own* souls and sins. Appearances are important in Milford, but Hawthorne shows how they can be counterproductive to true understanding, or true morality.

SIN AND GUILT

Hooper believes that everyone lives in a state of sin, inherited from Adam and Eve. He explains this on his deathbed, saying that everyone wears a "black veil." But the black veil over his own head could symbolize a specific sin he's committed, or it could be a teaching tool that represents his inherent evilness as a human being. The townspeople assume that Hooper has committed a specific crime, and because their Puritan community recognizes the danger of sin, they're horrified that Hooper seems to be showing his sin to the public. Ironically, even though Puritans believe that sin must be defeated at all costs, they would rather sweep it under the rug than talk about it and potentially cure it. It's also possible that the townspeople of Milford *do* understand what Hooper's veil means; in other words, it reminds them of their own secret sins, and they ostracize Hooper as a defense mechanism to avoid coming to terms with their own guilt.

Of course, the townspeople could be correct in saying that Hooper has committed a specific crime; in the end, we don't know why he veils his face. Hawthorne himself says that Hooper is "unlike" Joseph Moody of York, Maine, who veils his face as punishment for accidentally killing his friend, but it's unclear if this means that Hooper is innocent of specific wrongdoing or that he committed a *different* crime. In the same way Hooper cuts himself off from the town, Hawthorne cuts readers off from understanding him fully, using third person narration to distance us from Hooper's thoughts and feelings. As a result, the story seems to suggest that it's impossible to know to a certainty if another person is innocent or guilty of a specific crime. This might suggest that people shouldn't obsess over others' sins, but respect others and allow them to work through their own guilt.

It's clear that Hawthorne believes that the townspeople are wrong to gossip about other people's sins; what's less apparent is whether or not Hooper is right to obsess. By wearing the veil, Hooper brings misery to himself, but also to Elizabeth, his fiancée, and the townspeople, who are newly frightened by his sermons. "The Minister's Black Veil" might suggest that the profound focus on sin to the exclusion of so much else is itself dangerous, not only because it makes people treat others poorly, but because it makes people guilty and unhappy with themselves.

TEACHING BY EXAMPLE

There's a long-standing tradition in Christianity of "teaching by example": passing on moral lessons to others by making oneself an illustration. (One famous Christian who taught by example was Saint Augustine, who used his own life story, recorded in the *Confessions*, to show that Christian salvation is available to all human beings, no matter how sinful they are.) One of the key questions in "The Minister's Black Veil" is whether or not the "teaching methods" used by Hooper, a Christian minister, are successful.

At the beginning of the story, Hooper is a young, inexperienced preacher who pleases his congregation with "mild, persuasive influences" but doesn't impassion them to be good. When he begins to wear the veil, he gives the same sermons and delivers them in the same tone of voice, but because of his veil, his sermon is unusually sobering and effective for the congregation. As he grows older, Hooper's sermons grow increasingly "severe and gloomy" (or seem to in the minds of his congregation), and as a result, the townspeople concentrate on Christian values and the afterlife. People who convert to Christianity explicitly state that it was the sight of Hooper's black veil that made them change their ways. On his deathbed, speaking to the Reverend Clark, Hooper implies that he wore the veil in the first place to teach others a moral lesson: everyone is sinful ("on every visage a Black Veil").

Yet, it's unclear whether the townspeople ever understand Hooper's lesson. While it's certainly true that they take his sermons more seriously, and even convert to Christianity because of the veil, it would seem that they don't recognize the full extent of their own sinfulness. Indeed, Hooper has to explain himself on his deathbed because none of the townspeople who have lived with him for decades can understand why he has worn the veil. Hooper has taught the townspeople a lesson, but it's not clear exactly what lesson he's taught; meanwhile, the townspeople seem not to realize they've been taught anything. So Hawthorne questions Hooper's approach to teaching by example. Since people misinterpret moral lessons, it may be the case that morality can't really be "taught" at all.

ISOLATION

Immediately after Hooper wears the black veil, the people of Milford isolate him from their community.

Children and their parents refuse to respond when he greets them, Squire Saunders "forgets" to invite him to dinner, and even his fiancée, Elizabeth, abandons him. These changes are especially painful for Hooper because, Hawthorne notes, he is a friendly, loving person. Before Elizabeth leaves him, he begs her to stay, knowing full well that he will be doomed to a lifetime of isolation without her. As Hawthorne writes of Hooper later in life, "All through life that piece of crape had hung between him and the world: it had separated him from cheerful brotherhood and woman's love, and kept him in that saddest of all prisons, his own heart."

While Hooper's veil isolates him from Milford, it also symbolizes the isolation that all human beings experience. As he explains on his deathbed, he will remove the veil only "when the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator." In Hooper's view, all humans are isolated, in the sense that they are alone with their secret sins and their guilt. Ironically, Hooper's decision to wear a veil may have been an attempt to bridge the gap between himself and his friends by acknowledging sin and attempting to work through it.

Even if humans live in a state of isolation because of their sinfulness, Hawthorne suggests that it is possible to overcome this isolation with love, virtue, and patience. Elizabeth breaks off her engagement to Hooper, but she continues to love him and even tends to him on his deathbed. And for Hooper, who believes in the afterlife, all isolation is temporary, since in Heaven virtuous souls are united with God and with each other. Yet the fact that Hooper tries to teach his lesson on isolation and the townspeople never understand what he is trying to tell them only further reinforces the essential isolation between all people.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BLACK VEIL

Without a doubt, the most important symbol in "The Minister's Black Veil" is the black veil itself, but what it symbolizes is more complicated than it seems to either Hooper or the townspeople. To the townspeople, Hooper's veil is a clear sign that he is trying to atone for a grave sin. Yet Hooper implies that he intends the veil to be a symbol of mankind's general sinfulness, not any specific wrongdoing. It's possible that these two interpretations of the veil are one and the same; in other words, the townspeople focus exclusively on Hooper's sinfulness because, deep down, they recognize their own, and don't want to acknowledge it.

At the same time, the veil — a thin, flimsy, article of clothing, is a symbol of the superficiality of Puritan society. The townspeople of Milford judge Hooper on his appearance, not his behavior or his character; indeed, it's implied that Hooper himself doesn't change at all after he puts on the veil — he only *seems* gloomier to the townspeople because of the veil covering his face. Finally, Hooper's veil could symbolize his pride. Although he hides his face from the town, doing so paradoxically makes him more visible to others — in this sense, Hooper could be seen to be arrogantly raising himself above his peers.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Hawthorne's Short Stories* published in 2011.

The Minister's Black Veil Quotes

There was but one thing remarkable about his appearance. Swathed about his forehead, and hanging down over his face so low as to be shaken by his breath, Mr. Hooper had on a black veil. On a nearer view it seemed to consist of two folds of crape, which entirely concealed his features, except the mouth and chin, but probably did not intercept his sight, further than to give a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things.

Related Characters: Reverend Hooper

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, the narrator establishes the basics of the titular black veil. Mr. Hooper, the town preacher, shows up for church one Sunday morning wearing a black veil on his face and offering absolutely no explanation for why he does so.

One important detail to notice here is that the veil prevents other people from seeing Mr. Hooper's face, and yet doesn't entirely prevent Mr. Hooper from seeing other people's faces. In brief, there is a kind of asymmetry in the veil: Hooper continues to see other people more or less the same way he did previously (they just have a "darkened aspect"), but other people see Hooper completely differently than they did before. Hawthorne will continue exploring the symbolic meanings of the black veil for the rest of his story.

> Did he seek to hide [his face] from the dread Being whom he was addressing?

Related Characters: Reverend Hooper

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

At the townspeople look at Mr. Hooper, they notice that he's wearing a veil, and immediately assume the very worst about his character. Because the townspeople live in a very strict Puritan community, they decide that Mr. Hooper, the town preacher, is ashamed of a mysterious sin he's committed, and wants to hide from God.

The townspeople don't seem to consider the obvious fact that Mr. Hooper *can't* hide from God—putting a piece of cloth on his face isn't going to fool the Almighty, after all. Instead, the townspeople are so superficial and so obsessed with gossip and outward appearances that they immediately decide that Mr. Hooper is a sinner, just so they have something to talk about. Remarkably, a simple piece of cloth completely alters the townspeople's perception of a man they've known for years. These people are shallow and narrow-minded: they never bother to give their preacher the benefit of the doubt.

> Such was the effect of this simple piece of crape, that more than one woman of delicate nerves was forced to leave the meeting-house. Yet perhaps the pale-faced congregation was almost as fearful a sight to the minister, as his black veil to them.

Related Characters: Reverend Hooper

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Hawthorne establishes the back and forth between the townspeople and Mr. Hooper. At the same time that the townspeople are judging Mr. Hooper (assuming he's a sinner, gossiping about his appearance, etc.), Mr. Hooper may be judging the townspeople for their superficiality and narrow-mindedness. In other words, the narrator is suggesting, it's hypocritical for the townspeople to question Mr. Hooper's piety when the townspeople themselves are sinners, too.

One of the difficulties of this quotation is that it divides the "blame" evenly between the townspeople and Mr. Hooper. While it's true that the townspeople are superficial in the worst ways, Mr. Hooper partly seems to be manipulating his congregation as well. In using the veil to distinguish himself from other men, Hooper may be guilty of the sins of arrogance and pride.

> The sermon which he now delivered was marked by the same characteristics of style and manner as the general series of his pulpit oratory. But there was something, either in the sentiment of the discourse itself, or in the imagination of the auditors, which made it greatly the most powerful effort that had ever heard from their pastor's lips. It was tinged, rather more darkly than usual, with the gentle gloom of Mr. Hooper's temperament.

Related Characters: Reverend Hooper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12-13

Explanation and Analysis

In this ambiguous passage, Hawthorne leaves it up to readers to decide what is real and what is happening in the townspeople's minds. Mr. Hooper delivers a sermon that the townspeople find to be markedly different from his usual Sunday offering. The sermon is dark, serious, and intimidating—or at least it seems so to the townspeople. But as Hawthorne makes clear, whatever difference the townspeople think they're hearing may be a product of their "imagination," rather than any actual difference in Mr. Hooper's speaking style or content.

The ambiguity in this section points to the broader ambiguity of the story itself. We don't know who has truly "changed"—Mr. Hooper, or the townspeople. In other words, Hawthorne leaves it unclear whether Mr. Hooper has committed a sin and is punishing himself for it, or whether Mr. Hooper is exactly the same person he's always been—albeit with a black veil on his face—and the townspeople are only *treating* him differently because of their prejudices and insecurities about their own sinfulness.

> The people hurried out with indecorous confusion, eager to communicate their pent-up amazement, and conscious of lighter spirits the moment they lost sight of the black veil. Some gathered in little circles, huddled closely together, with their mouths all whispering in the center; some went homeward alone, rapt in silent meditation; some talked loudly, and profaned the Sabbath day with ostentatious laughter.

Related Characters: Reverend Hooper

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

The townspeople emerge from church, eager to talk about Mr. Hooper's black veil. In doing so, the townspeople betray their narrow-minded ideas of good and evil, and their equally immature preoccupations on gossip and superficial appearances.

The fact that the townspeople feel "lighter" as soon as the black veil is out of sight should tell us that the townspeople are surprisingly narrow-minded when it comes to defining good and evil. The townspeople assume that Mr. Hooper must be a sinner because he's wearing a simple piece of clothing, never stopping to think that there are plenty of sinners who never signal their evil in any outward way. The townspeople live in an extremely small, close-knit community, in which people are always on the lookout for signs of unusual behavior. In this community, where appearances are everything, a black veil is practically proof of sin.

The irony of the townspeople's gossip is crystal clear: even though they're talking about Mr. Hooper's own sinfulness, they are being sinful themselves in the process, "profaning the Sabbath day." In general, the townspeople forget about their own sins in their haste to condemn Hooper.

> "Truly do I," replied the lady; "and I would not be alone with [Hooper] for the world. I wonder he is not afraid to be alone with himself!"
> Men are sometimes so," said her husband [the physician].

Related Characters: The physician (speaker), Reverend Hooper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the physician finally shows signs of understanding the deeper meaning of the black veil. As far as the majority of the town is concerned, Mr. Hooper's veil has exactly one meaning: he's a sinner. But for the physician, the veil has a darker, more general significance. The veil reminds him that all men—i.e., not just Hooper—are afraid to be alone with themselves. In other words, all human beings have secrets to hide, and at times the weight of their sins is too much to bear.

The physician's interpretation of the veil suggests that perhaps Hooper decided to wear a veil in order to remind the townspeople of their own sinful nature: Hooper tries to be an example, externalizing his sin in order to remind his peers of their own sin. If this is Hooper's aim, then he mostly fails. Most of the townspeople (except the physician) miss the point of the veil altogether. Or perhaps they're so frightened of the veil because, deep down, they *are* reminded of their own sinfulness.

> The clergyman stepped into the room where the corpse was laid, and bent over the coffin, to take a last farewell of his deceased parishioner. As he stooped, the veil hung straight down from his forehead, so that, if her eyelids had not been closed forever, the dead maiden might have seen his face. Could Mr. Hooper be fearful of her glance, that he so hastily caught back the black veil?

Related Characters: Reverend Hooper, The young woman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Mr. Hooper attends the funeral of a young woman who has died very recently. He bends over her dead body, so that his veil hangs down. Even though the young woman of course can't look back at his exposed face, Hooper quickly covers himself again. Some critics, including Edgar Allan Poe, believe that this scene is the "key" to understanding the entire story. According to Poe, Hooper committed adultery with the young woman, and is wearing the veil to punish himself for his sexual sinning.

Poe's interpretation is only one point of view in the general debate over Hooper's behavior. In the simplest terms, the question is: is Hooper wearing a veil because of a specific sin he committed, or is he acting out of a more general belief in man's sinful nature? Hawthorne doesn't answer this question either way, but his choice to include this scene between Hooper and the young woman might provide evidence for the former point of view. The very fact that Hooper starts wearing a veil the day after a young woman dies suggests that the two events are somehow linked. But perhaps Hawthorne is testing us: just like the townspeople themselves, we the readers would rather "gossip" about Hooper's specific actions than see the broader symbolic purpose of his veil.

"There is an hour to come," said he, "when all of us shall cast aside our veils. Take it not amiss, beloved friend, if I wear this piece of crape till then."

Related Characters: Reverend Hooper (speaker), Elizabeth

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Hooper's young fiancee, Elizabeth, begs him to remove his veil so that they can be happily married, without the gossip of the townspeople distracting them from happiness. Hooper explains that he'll keep his veil on, because life is short: compared with an eternity in Heaven, a couple decades with a veil is nothing.

The scene illustrates the strange combination of arrogance and humility in Hooper's personality. Elizabeth wants Hooper to remove his veil so that they can have a happy life together. Hooper refuses to give in to Elizabeth's desires because he's more focused on his afterlife in Heaven than he is than his life on Earth. To a Puritan, Hooper's refusal might seem like a paragon of Christian virtue (the Puritans were told that they should focus on Heaven, not Earth). And yet Hooper's continued fidelity to his veil draws *more* attention to him in the community. So while it's possible to read Hooper's behavior as humble and pious, it's also possible to interpret it as hubris disguised as modesty: Hooper is raising himself above other men with this outward show of humility.

"But what if the world will not believe that it is the type of an innocent sorrow?" urged Elizabeth. "Beloved and respected as you are, there may be whispers that you hide your face under the consciousness of secret sin. For the sake of your holy office do away this scandal."

Related Characters: Elizabeth (speaker), Reverend Hooper

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Elizabeth, Hooper's fiancee, tries one last time to convince her lover to remove his veil. Here, she gives one simple reason why Hooper should show his face again: otherwise the townspeople will assume that Hooper is a sinner. In essence, Elizabeth is urging Hooper to give into the small-mindedness of the community; she doesn't want to spend the rest of her life being judged by her peers for marrying a supposed "sinner."

The fact that Elizabeth would cite the townspeople's gossip as a reason for Hooper to remove his veil suggests that she's not much more open-minded than the townspeople themselves. Even if Elizabeth loves Hooper sincerely, she's not confident enough in her love and her faith to marry him: she cares more about the opinions of her neighbors.

"Have patience with me, Elizabeth!" cried he, passionately. "Do not desert me though this veil must be between us here on earth. Be mine, and hereafter there shall be no veil over my face, no darkness between our souls. It is but a mortal veil; it is not for eternity. Oh, you know not how lonely I am, and how frightened to be alone behind my black veil!

Related Characters: Reverend Hooper (speaker), Elizabeth

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Mr. Hooper begs Elizabeth to marry him, even after he insists that he has no intention of taking off his black veil. In clear, plain terms, Hooper is laying out

Elizabeth's choice for her. She can either abandon him, giving into the pressure of the Puritan community in which they both live (and perhaps to her own sense of fear and uneasiness regarding her fiance's appearance). Or she can spend the rest of her mortal life married to Hooper—after which they'll surely be rewarded for their loyalty and piety with a place in Heaven.

The passage is also provides some of the most convincing evidence that Hooper is sincerely trying to teach a moral lesson by wearing his veil, rather than arrogantly raising himself above his fellow men. In the past, Hooper has behaved calmly and peacefully around his peers. Here, however, Hooper admits the truth: he's afraid of the difficult path that lies ahead of him, and wants a wife to support him while he wears the veil. Of course, the passage could also suggest, more generally, that Hooper is afraid of his own sinful nature (afraid of being alone beneath his veil), and wants to marry Elizabeth in order to cement his place as a righteous, pious man. (This interpretation could support Poe's hypothesis that Hooper was romantically involved with the young woman who died—Hooper sinned with the woman, and now wants to marry Elizabeth to "move on.")

> Among all its bad influences, the black veil had the one desirable effect of making its wearer a very efficient clergyman. By the aid of his mysterious emblem—for there was no other apparent cause—he became a man of awful power over souls that were in agony for sin. His converts always regarded him with a dread peculiar to themselves, affirming, though but figuratively, that before he brought them to celestial light they had been with him behind the black veil.

Related Characters: Reverend Hooper

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Hawthorne explains how Hooper's veil acts as a teaching tool for the Puritan community. When he wears the black veil, Hooper becomes a more powerful preacher: the veil becomes a visual aid, enhancing his descriptions of sin and damnation. The veil is so powerful, indeed, that sinners sometimes choose to convert to Christianity simply to avoid the awful fate that the veil symbolizes.

The converts Hawthorne mentions here have learned an important lesson from Hooper, thanks to the veil. And yet they're still missing the point. The sight of the black veil reminds the converts of their own sinfulness, and compels them to be better Christians. But the converts also seemingly continue to assume that Hooper *himself* is a sinner, simply because of the clothing he chooses to wear. In other words, even when the townspeople recognize that the veil is a symbol of their own sins, they still can't help but think of the veil as a mark of Hooper's guilt—and so he remains isolated even from those whose souls he has "saved."

> In this manner Mr. Hooper spent a long life, irreproachable in outward act, yet shrouded in dismal suspicions; kind and loving, though unloved and dimly feared; a man apart from men, shunned in their health and joy, but ever summoned to their aid in mortal anguish.

Related Characters: Reverend Hooper

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Hawthorne fast-forwards through Hooper's later years. For many decades, we learn, Hooper continues to wear the veil, attracting a lot of attention for doing so. The townspeople never get used to the sight of Hooper's black veil: even though he appears to be a completely moral, pious person, the townspeople are so enamored with unusual appearances and superficial signs that they continue to regard the veil as frightening or somehow abnormal.

Why do the townspeople continue to treat the veil as a sign of evil—wouldn't they get used to it after a few years? One reason why the townspeople continue to fear the veil, Hawthorne suggests, is that they really do regard it as a reminder of their own sinful nature—even if they would never admit this in public. The fact that the townspeople summon Hooper to their deathbeds, where they have every reason to be honest with themselves, suggests that they understand Hooper's point better than they seem to. The townspeople behave hypocritically. When they're healthy and happy, they treat the black veil as a sign of Hooper's sinister nature and pretend that the veil has no relevance to

their own lives. It's only when the townspeople are on the brink of death that they're forced to admit the truth and confess their own sinful nature.

> "Why do you tremble at me alone?" cried he, turning his veiled face round the circle of pale spectators. "Tremble also at each other. Have men avoided me and women shown no pity and children screamed and fled only for my black veil? What but the mystery which it obscurely typifies has made this piece of crape so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend, the lover to his best-beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin,—then deem me a monster for the symbol beneath which I have lived and die. I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a black veil!"

Related Characters: Reverend Hooper (speaker), Reverend Clark

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22-23

Explanation and Analysis

In this final passage from the story, Hooper gives an explanation for his behavior that explains everything and nothing. On his deathbed, Hooper offers one final "sermon": (the presence of "pale spectators" is supposed to remind us of the opening scene of the story, in which Hooper preaches in the church). When asked why he's chosen to wear a black veil for his entire life, Hooper responds by claiming that everyone around him wears a black veil, too. In other words, Hooper believes that all human beings shelter secret sins—the only difference is that Hooper has externalized his own sins, while most people hide their sins from others. Furthermore, Hooper rejects the way his fellow townspeople have ignored him over the years—the fact that he's wearing a veil should make no difference, he claims. Because everyone "wears a veil"—i.e., because everyone is a sinner—Hooper is no more terrifying than any of his peers; indeed, he may be better than his peers, since he's at least being honest and upfront about his sinful nature. In ignoring Hooper, the townspeople are ignoring their own hidden sins, arrogantly behaving as if they have nothing to hide when, in fact, they do.

The problem with Hooper's explanation is that, arguably, he's dodging the question. Hooper was asked *why* he suddenly decided to wear the veil (could it have been his affair with the young woman?). So in a way, Hooper *is* concealing his sinfulness: he's disguising the specific sin he committed under the guise of teaching a "moral lesson" to the townspeople. Furthermore, Hooper's behavior in this climactic scene seems arrogant and grandiose—he seems to enjoy intimidating his peers, raising himself above others in order to strike fear and guilt into their hearts.

In the end, there's no "right" interpretation of the story: perhaps Hooper is hypocritical; perhaps the townspeople are; perhaps everyone is. But of course, how you choose to interpret the story is meant to speak towards your personality and your attitude toward good and evil.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE MINISTER'S BLACK VEIL

In a footnote, Hawthorne explains that Mr. Joseph Moody, who lived in Maine, also wore a veil, though unlike Reverend Hooper, the protagonist of Hawthorne's story, he did as atonement for accidentally killing one of his friends.

It's strange that Hawthorne sets the scene for his unsettling and macabre story by commenting, in this footnote at the beginning of the story, who his protagonist is not *like. The information that Hooper wore a veil for a different reason than having killed a friend is reassuring, but also sinister — is Hooper different from Moody because he didn't commit a sin, or because he committed a* different *sin? This will be one of the key questions of the story.*

On a bright Sunday in the town of Milford, everyone is walking to church as usual: happy children, flirtatious young men and women and married couples. As the townspeople take their seats, the town sexton notices the Reverend Mr. Hooper walking to church, and cries out, surprised, that he has something on his face.

Milford is a small, close-knit community dominated by religion. Its residents' lives center around routines, of which church attendance is one of the most important, but their cheerfulness contrasts markedly with the Puritans' notorious somberness. Note also how any change in the town's normal routine is noticed immediately.

The townspeople turn and look at Hooper as he approaches the church. Many cannot recognize him, but the sexton insists that it is Hooper. Another parson was meant to preach that Sunday, but he had to attend to a funeral in his own town.

The townspeople are constantly being watched by one another, consistent with the importance they place on behavior as a signifier of one's worthiness for heaven. Within seconds of the sexton's noticing Hooper's changed appearance, everyone is looking at him. It's not clear what to do with the information that another parson was meant to be in Milford, but there's a strong temptation to treat it as a "clue," as if there's a specific explanation for why Hooper looks different.

Hooper is a young, unmarried preacher, though he dresses so neatly that it looks as if he has a wife to help him. Yet now he is wearing a veil that hides his entire face, except for his mouth and chin. While the townspeople cannot see Hooper's face, Hooper can see the townspeople through the material of the veil, though they must look darker to him. He walks among the townspeople and nods at them kindly, but they are too shocked to respond.

Although Hooper dresses very properly and perfectly normally, his veiled appearance shocks the townspeople. The veil distances him from his congregation, and this distancing goes both ways: the townspeople cannot see his face, and he can see theirs with less clarity.

The townspeople mutter their disapproval of Hooper's black veil. The sexton says he doesn't feel as if Hooper's face is really behind the veil, and others wonder if Hooper has gone mad. Hooper delivers his sermon, wearing his veil the entire time, almost as if he is trying to hide from God. Several women are so shocked and uncomfortable that they leave.

At first, Hooper's veil interferes with his duties as a reverend: instead of concentrating on the sermon, his congregation gossips and even walks out. People immediately assume that he is trying to hide from God, that the veil is a signal of a sin he has committed.

Hooper is a good preacher, though ordinarily his sermons are mild, not passionate. Today, his sermon, about how humans hide their sins from one another, forgetting that God can see everything, seems unusually dark and powerful. The congregation senses that Hooper knows all of their sins. Even though his voice and gestures are the same, he seems like a stranger; the townspeople cannot tell if it's because his sermon is darker than usual, or because his appearance is more frightening.

Appearances are so important in Milford that Hooper seems to have changed completely. Even though his appearance distracts his congregation, it gives him some advantages as a preacher. His sermon about sin is unusually impressive, at least partly because his intimidating presence makes the townspeople feel guilty. Hawthorne leaves it unclear how much of the difference is in Hooper's sermon and how much is in the townspeople's own minds, impacted by their own fear of the black veil.

At the end of the sermon, Hooper walks among his congregation. Unusually, no one walks alongside him, and Squire Saunders, who often invites him to dinner, "forgets" to extend an invitation. The townspeople leave the church, eager to discuss Hooper's veil. Some "profane the Sabbath day" by laughing at it; some maintain that Hooper has weak eyes and needs to restore his sight. The town physician says that Hooper may be losing his mind, and adds that he looks ghostly. His wife says that she would never be alone with him, and wonders why he isn't afraid to be alone with himself. The physician replies that men sometimes are.

Despite the apparent success of his sermon, Hooper's veil isolates him from the townspeople who were previously friendly with him. Moreover, the veil continues to distract the congregation from religion and morality. Despite dismissing Hooper's behavior as insane, the physician shows some signs of sympathizing with it, noting that all humans are afraid of themselves and, implicitly, that all humans are sinners. The physicians insight also suggests a further insight, which is that the Hooper may wear the veil to suggest exactly what the physician is noting, that all people are sinners, and that one of the reasons people are afraid of the veil is that they don't want to face this meaning of the veil.

Hooper gives the afternoon service, which includes a funeral service for a young woman. Hooper's black veil seems appropriate for the occasion. When he bends over the woman's coffin, his veil hangs down, so that if the woman were alive she would be able to see his face, but he quickly covers himself again. A superstitious old woman notes that the woman's corpse seems to shudder slightly when Hooper looks at it.

Edgar Allan Poe thought that the young woman was Hooper's love, and her death was the true reason why he wore a veil. While this interpretation is plausible (that Hooper begins wearing the veil on the same day that she's buried suggests that the two events could be *linked), the fact that we feel the need to "explain" Hooper's behavior suggests that, like the townspeople, we're more comfortable with believing that Hooper has sinned than we are with thinking that the veil might be a symbol or indication that everyone has, that we have. In any event, Hooper demonstrates his commitment to hiding his face, even shielding it from someone who can't possibly look back.*

At the funeral, Hooper delivers a moving sermon in which he expresses his certainty that the young woman is in Heaven, and his hope that everyone in the congregation is living a moral life so that they, too, will one day go there. As Hooper walks away from the church, two townspeople agree that he seems to be walking next to the woman's spirit.

Hawthorne again suggests that Hooper's veiled appearance makes him a better preacher. Hooper's sermon also explains the "stakes" of piety — entrance into Heaven — and suggests a reason why he may be wearing the veil. The two townspeople's vision could, as Edgar Allan Poe believed, imply that Hooper was romantically involved with the young woman, but it also symbolizes how quickly the town associates one of their own with death and the supernatural, simply because of what he's wearing.

The same evening as the funeral service, a young, popular, beautiful couple is to be married. The town waits eagerly for the ceremony, and hopes also that Hooper, who is known to enjoy weddings, will stop being gloomy. But when Hooper arrives to marry the couple, he is still wearing the veil, casting a mood of seriousness and foreboding over the ceremony.

The town still hopes that in a joyful moment that joins two people of the town together that Hooper will himself be joyful, remove his veil, and rejoin with the town. When he keeps it on, it suggests that he is sacrificing his own pleasure for the sake of the veil, even if it's not clear why.

The wedding is as somber as a famous wedding mentioned by the narrator, in which the groom was about to die. The bride, intimidated by Hooper, looks as pale as the corpse that was buried earlier in the day. As Hooper goes through the marriage services, he catches a glimpse of his own appearance in a mirror, and is so frightened by what he sees that he spills ceremonial wine on the carpet, and runs out of the church into the night—as the narrator puts it, the Earth is also wearing a "black veil."

The second wedding to which Hawthorne alludes is actually from another story he wrote, "The Wedding Knell." Hooper's anxiety with his own appearance makes it less clear why he has chosen to wear the veil, though perhaps it signals the deep meaning of the veil for him, or because in seeing himself in the veil he can imagine the years of loneliness ahead of him. The fact that Earth also wears a black veil suggests that Hooper's choice is more natural, or more universal, than the townspeople believe.

The next day, everyone in Milford talks about Hooper's veil: children, friends, gossips, etc. No one dares to ask Hooper why he is wearing it, even though it's well know that Hooper is usually open to advice and questioning. Eventually, the town agrees to send a group of people to inquire about the veil. Yet as the group visits and sits with Hooper, they notice that he is smiling sadly, and feel so uneasy that they do not ask him about the veil.

The townspeople are eager to talk about Hooper, but highly reluctant to talk to him, suggesting that sinful gossip is more entertaining to them than meaningful conversation and personal engagement. Hooper's sad smile suggests that while he dislikes the distance that is growing between him and his congregation, he knows it's inevitable.

Hooper's fiancée, Elizabeth, is the only person in Milford who isn't afraid of Hooper's veil. She goes to speak with him, and thinks that there is nothing terrifying about his appearance. When Elizabeth asks him to remove the veil and explain why he has been wearing it, Hooper replies that he has enough to be sorry about to merit a black veil. Elizabeth advises Hooper that the town will think that Hooper has committed a "secret sin," and encourages him to remove it for the sake of his job. Hooper smiles sadly, and says that all humans have secret sins.

Even if Milford is full of gossips, there are also loyal, honest people, like Elizabeth. But even Elizabeth is more concerned with appearances and the effects of gossip than the abstract belief that everyone has sins. Hooper's explanation for his wearing the veil is at once noble and arrogant: he is seemingly willing to risk his position as a reverend because of his conviction, but he also seems to be setting himself up as a Christ-like symbol of others' sins — that smile could suggest pride.

As Elizabeth attempts to reason with Hooper, she begins to feel afraid of his veil for the first time. Hooper begs her not to leave him, and asks her to try to understand him, insisting that he will only wear his veil on earth, that in the hereafter they will be united without the veil between them. He adds that he is afraid to be alone. Elizabeth asks him to lift his veil so that she can look at him, but when he refuses, she breaks off the engagement and leaves him forever. Hooper is greatly saddened, but even as he grieves, he smiles sadly, thinking that it was only a veil that separated him from Elizabeth.

Elizabeth begins to fear Hooper's veil, perhaps because she is afraid of what it symbolizes — the sin in all human beings. Hooper's plea for Elizabeth to stay shows the extent of his sacrifice, and give his decision to wear the veil great poignancy. He knows the veil is going to sentence him to a life of loneliness. Hooper also reveals another reason why he wears the veil: he is willing to endure loneliness in his earthly life because he believes in the rewards of Heaven. His smile at Elizabeth's departure may signal his optimism about the state of his own soul, or it may be a kind of recognition that while to Elizabeth it seemed like the black veil stood between the two of them he knows that this is but an illusion and that, in fact, there is a deeper more fundamental separation that exists between all mortals, even those in love. In this second reading, it becomes almost funny, or even comforting that someone could mistake the black veil as the issue when in fact the real issue is so much more profound and impossible to escape.

After Elizabeth leaves Hooper, no one tries to remove or understand his veil. Some say that Hooper is mad or eccentric, while most people are simply afraid of him. Hooper is pained that the townspeople avoid him, and gives up his customary walks to the graveyard because he is conscious that he frightens others. Hooper comes to hate his own veil, so much so that he avoids looking in the mirror. Rumors say that Hooper wears the veil because he is guilty of a great crime, and even that the wind avoids him so as not to blow the veil off his face. Through the years, Hooper always smiles sadly.

Hooper endures great suffering for the sake of his veil Like Christ, his pain illustrates the cruelty of other people. The townspeople continue to judge Hooper by his appearance, insist that he must be guilty of a crime, and even invent superstitions about him, as if he's a ghostly figure. Hooper continues to believe in the necessity of his choice, perhaps because of his belief that he will be rewarded for his suffering in Heaven or the need for him to communicate his message to the community.

Although it isolates Hooper from Milford, the veil makes him an excellent reverend. Because the townspeople are afraid of Hooper, they focus on religion. Converts to Christianity say that before they discovered faith, they were behind Hooper's veil, and sinners request Hooper's presence on their deathbeds. One year, a new governor is elected, and Hooper is asked to deliver a sermon. He makes such an impression that the government's laws that year are gloomy and severe. Hooper goes through life behaving with irreproachable morals, but even so he is always shrouded in a reputation of having committed some sin. He is always kind and loving, but always vaguely feared. He becomes famous throughout New England, and earns the respectful title of Father Hooper.

Hawthorne paints an insightful and contradictory picture of early American Puritanism. Hooper becomes a successful Puritan priest in part because Puritanism is based on the fear of sin and damnation. Thus, Hooper's frightening appearance is a useful teaching tool, showing the people of Milford what awaits them if they sin. By showing Hooper's influence on the New England government's legislation, he suggests the lasting influence that the Puritans had on the United States. At the same time, Hawthorne questions and critiques Puritanism: for a community to be so easily swayed by an article of clothing is proof of its overreliance on routines and appearances.

Hooper grows old and close to death; the physician says that he can do nothing to save him. Although he has no family, many clergymen come to visit him on his deathbed, including the young Reverend Clark. Elizabeth, who has continued to love Hooper even after leaving him, now takes care of him. Hooper's mind is confused, but he continues to insist that his veil not be removed. Elizabeth faithfully follows his orders.

The story is coming "full circle" — the people who knew Hooper when he was a young priest, such as Elizabeth and the physician, have returned to his side, and there's even a young priest whose presence symbolizes the everlasting nature of Christianity and its doctrines, and the passing down of knowledge and experience within the church. While most of the people of Milford ostracize Hooper, some, such as Elizabeth, continue to love him. Elizabeth does not understand why Hooper wears the veil, but her feelings for him reach beyond superficial appearances.

Reverend Clark approaches Hooper on his deathbed and requests that he allow his veil to be lifted so that the other clergymen may see the face of a pious man. Hooper insists that the veil never be lifted on earth. Clark asks Hooper what crime he committed that he wore the veil for so long. In reply, Hooper struggles to sit upright in his deathbed, smiles sadly, and asks why the townspeople have avoided him simply because he has worn a veil. Why have they trembled to see him, but not to see each other? With his dying words, he cries that he can only be considered a monster when friends reveal their "inmost hearts" to their friends, when lovers do the same to their beloveds, and when people don't try in vain to hide their sins from God. He looks around, he says, and sees a black veil on everyone's face! As the people around him lean back, away from each other, in fright at these words, Hooper dies with a faint smile once again on his lips. Hooper is buried and grass grows over his grave, but the thought remains awful that his face, surely dust, is still covered by the black veil.

For the first time since Elizabeth leaves him, Hooper is asked why he wears the veil, except this time, the question is even more pointed — "How did you sin?" Hooper gives a similar answer to the one he gave Elizabeth, except that he phrases it much more pointedly, criticizing the superficiality and hypocrisy of the townspeople who have made his life miserable for years because they'd rather judge him than judge themselves. It could be argued that Hooper doesn't really answer Clark's question at all, but simply says that it's the wrong question; in other words, he doesn't say if there's a specific sin that caused him to put on the veil one day — instead, he says that people should focus on their own sins. While this isn't tremendously satisfying if one thinks of "The Minister's Black Veil" as a mystery without a solution, perhaps Hawthorne wants the readers, like the townspeople of Milford, to follow Hooper's lesson and appreciate the story for the "parable" it is.

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